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ABSTRACT

The primary organizational structure for a city's schools is the district. Its critics, however, consider that dysfunction was designed into school districts' structure by virtue of their history. District structure was built on the notions that intelligence was innate, that the "scientific management" model produced optimal results, and that schools should be separated from politics. Many district reform efforts have not worked. This paper offers a reform solution that achieves both positive educational results and equity in a "local educational support system" or "smart district." Such systems provide all schools in the "school community" support for results at scale, ensure equity, and emphasize community responsibility. Essential functions include providing schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions; ensuring that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and making decisions and holding people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices. Each of these functions must work in concert--none is sufficient on its own to ensure results and equity. Strong leadership and political will are needed to overcome resistance to change; brainpower is needed to design steps intelligently; and skills and constructive relationships are needed to implement such a system effectively. (Contains 28 references.) (RT)

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School Communities that Work for Results and Equity

School Communities that Work:
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

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School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, to examine an element of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

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The primary organizational structure for a city's schools is the district. For the vast majority of schools across the country, the district continues in traditional ways to control the money, classify the students, assign the teachers, and set the work rules. As local mechanisms for democratic polity on education, districts can create a climate that builds community ownership and support for schools – or shuts it out. School districts also have the responsibility to implement, integrate, and monitor an often contradictory array of national, state, and local education reforms. Despite the central role of districts in our education system, nearly two decades of school reform have virtually ignored the part districts can play in promoting or hindering school change.

Although districts successfully serve some societal functions (such as employment for adults, contracts with businesses and service industries, and vehicles for local democratic participation), most large urban districts are no longer adequate *educational* institutions, especially for poor and minority students. They have failed to provide effective support for schools, leaving many schools without critical resources needed to improve their curriculum and the knowledge and skills of their teachers and school leaders. Because so many districts are failing in their paramount function – education – they are easy targets for critics who contend that their isolation from schools and communities and their outdated and ineffective structure impede, rather than enable, improvement.

These concerns notwithstanding, SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK believes that certain fundamental characteristics of school districts – their political and fiscal accountability; their composition, encompassing many schools; and their reach across communities – make the district, rather than the state or the individual school, the place reformers ought to look first for equitable, sustainable, and scaleable improvement strategies.

The role of the district is especially important in large cities, since that is where many of our nation's most disadvantaged students live. The one hundred largest districts alone are responsible for educating more than one-fifth of the nation's schoolchildren, two-fifths of our minority students, and at least 12 percent of our poor children (NCES 2001). Most of these districts are urban, and most of them serve 50,000 students or more. Failing to produce and sustain high-quality schools at scale will exacerbate the inequities that currently separate poor children and children of color from their more advantaged peers.

The pressure to improve whole systems of schools is intense. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, large numbers of schools will likely be labeled *low-performing*. The consequences involve both supports and sanctions – the latter of increasing intensity. At the same time, the law requires states to label districts as *low-performing* if they have large numbers of failing schools. In many of our large urban districts, as many as half the schools might be targeted. New ways of looking at districts and addressing these seemingly intractable problems are now of the utmost importance.

The Problem with Districts

The achievement of students in urban school districts lags behind their peers in non-urban areas (see, for example, Editorial Projects 1998; Lippman et al. 1996). The gaps exist in every subject area; they are largest in mathematics and science. The achievement gap grows wider as students reach the upper grades – *if* they reach the upper grades. Urban students are nearly twice as likely to drop out of school as non-urban students (Editorial Projects 1998).

Because of these persistent gaps in educational outcomes, many critics have questioned the viability of districts and the wisdom of continuing to provide them with resources. The ability to function of many urban districts is affected by severe organizational challenges: funding inequities compared with their suburban counterparts; growing numbers of students needing specialized services; increasingly complex relationships with their communities; alarming personnel turnover; and a distressing lack of school- and district-level leadership. The institutional structure of districts, which reflects outmoded solutions to the problems of a bygone age, is at least partly to blame for these problems.

Historic Roots: Built-in Inequity

In many respects, the characteristics of districts that current reformers cite as dysfunctional are part of their design. In the first decades of the last century, an earlier breed of reformers – known as administrative progressives – sought a remedy for the patronage and provincialism of the highly localized school governance system of the nineteenth century. Taking their cue from the growing manufacturing economy, they tried to create the "one best system" (Tyack 1974) that would produce assimilated, productive citizens as efficiently as Ford's factories produced cars. Their intent was to separate schooling from politics through corporate-style "scientific management," led by an expert superintendent and his board of directors. Like corporate managers, these professionals were to make and enforce policies that would be carried out by the "workers" in the schools. Standardization – of inputs, not outputs – was the goal.

The belief that intelligence was innate and that school existed merely to sort out who had it and who didn't were two of the foundational assumptions of the administrative progressives. (Tyack 1974, 2000). The idea that only a small proportion of children were meant to succeed academically was literally built into our education system.

A century later, this structure is an anachronism. By rewarding compliance over professional judgment and separating the schools from the community, the administrative progressives of the early twentieth century created a system that almost guarantees that innovation will be thwarted. Good ideas from the schools or from outside the system are not welcome. And the results are evident: virtually every city has schools that are inspiring models of what public education could be; schools that exemplify public education at its worst; and many examples in between the two extremes. Good instruction and good schools are idiosyncratic rather than pervasive, and lessons from successful schools and districts are not widely learned or heeded.

Another legacy of the administrative progressives was their failure to free school systems from politics. In contemporary urban school districts, school board positions are often seen as stepping stones to higher office and are frequently the refuge of ideologues more intent on political jockeying than addressing the needs of children. Unproductive, adversarial relationships between district and union leaders often move educational concerns to a back burner, and special interest groups and well-connected individuals lobby for advantages at the cost of "other people's children" (Delpit 1995). And though most official discriminatory policies have been abolished, schools still manage to sort students along the too-predictable lines of race and class.

Recent Reforms: Insufficient Results

The district structure first promoted by the administrative progressives nearly a century ago has persisted remarkably. The intensive waves of school reform that have swept the nation in the last two decades have failed to address the structure and operation of school districts as one of the root causes of our educational problems.

In many ways, the goals of the current reformers are the right ones. Driven by concerns about lack of competitiveness in a knowledge-based global economy, business and government leaders have led the charge for reforms that expect more of all students. In many communities, educator-reformers, parent groups, and other local groups have advocated for resources and services that will enable their children to measure up and succeed. And, across the board, policy-makers and the public alike seem to be in agreement that good teaching is at the heart of better student and school performance (Public Education Network & Education Week 2002).

Yet none of the most popular solutions has helped us reach these admirable goals. For example, nearly every state and many large districts have adopted challenging content and performance standards for students. Some students and some schools have reached the standards, but many – in some locales, most – have not. Accountability provisions and experimentation with school vouchers, school choice, and charter schools have not resulted in the vast improvement in schools that their advocates predicted. Big-city superintendents, employed in what is often called "the toughest job in America," initiate wide-ranging reforms but move in and out of their positions quickly (Yee & Cuban 1996). City and state elected officials are channeling their frustration with the slow pace of improvement by turning control of large urban systems over to mayors and state governments. Urban school districts, facing unprecedented demands and saddled with outmoded structures and practices, have become pressure cookers for the frustrations and aspirations Americans associate with public education.

Although recent reforms have brought heightened and necessary attention to the needs of low-performing schools, the reforms themselves have been insufficient to bring about improved results for all schools and students. Accountability creates incentives for schools to improve but does not provide the wherewithal needed in schools with poorly prepared teachers and administrators or with inadequate curricula or instructional programs. And efforts to reconstitute schools and to develop charter schools, small schools, and "whole-school" reform models – reforms that take a "one school at a time" approach – weren't designed to address the needs of whole *communities* of schools.

While many of these efforts have had real successes, the limitation of school-by-school approaches is that they provide for only the favored schools what all schools need to produce the results that all children deserve.

The Solution: A Local Education Support System

We already know a great deal about the kind of external supports that help schools to improve, and there are a variety of organizations that have been providing them to some schools. But these external supports must be made available to *all* schools in a community. We envision a new kind of school system – what we call a *local education support system*, or *smart district*, to achieve both results and equity.

Support for Results at Scale

Research on school-by-school reform efforts provides abundant evidence that schools need better supports and stronger incentives to improve, particularly if they are already low-performing. A review of the last two decades of education research shows that schools are more likely to improve when they can get the following types of supports:

- high standards and expectations (Education Trust 1999); a shared philosophy about learning (Abelmann et al. 1999); and the authority to make key decisions, including hiring staff who support the philosophy (Hill et al. 2000)

- a pool of well-qualified teachers and administrators (NCTAF 1996; CCCUSR 1995)
- ready access to, and incentives to participate in, high-quality professional development; and on-site assistance to equip teachers and school leaders with the skills and knowledge to teach challenging content to a diverse student body (NCTAF 1996; Darling-Hammond 2000; Darling-Hammond 1997)
- materials and curriculum support to assist schools in developing courses of study that are aligned with standards
- respectful and trusting relationships that connect school staff, students, and parents – both on a person-to-person basis and through formal organizations like community-based groups and subject-matter networks (Bryk & Schneider 2002)
- a mechanism for comparing school progress in terms of equity, results, and other student outcomes with other schools with similar student populations (Wasley & Fine 2000; Ragland et al. 1999)
- access to economies of scale (for functions like data and technology management as well as transportation, food services, etc.) (Chubb & Moe 1990; Epstein 1991; Comer 1993, 1999)
- substantive parent and community involvement in schools and in the lives of students (Schorr 1997)

These necessary supports come, for the most part, from sources outside the school. Schools are not likely to improve if they have to go it alone.[1]

Other institutions and agencies, apart from the district, can provide external supports that help schools to improve. For example, reform support organizations, such as national reform advocates, local education funds, and fee-for-service consultation and management groups (both for-profit and non-profit) can monitor school progress and provide pressure for continued improvement (Wong 1998; Luhm, Foley & Corcoran 1998). In addition, such organizations can help provide professional development and technical support; intermediary organizations supporting schools taking part in the Annenberg Challenge served this function effectively (Annenberg Foundation 2002). Reform support organizations have also helped charter schools – schools developed on the idea that school autonomy is paramount – by providing technical assistance and support in goal-setting, legal requirements, business matters, and curricular and instructional issues (Wohlstetter 1997).

Another reason not to let schools go it alone is the question of scale. The sheer numbers of schools that aren't serving students well suggests that school-by-school approaches will never reach all the schools that need support for improvement. The smallest of our one hundred largest school districts serves fifty schools; the biggest serves over a thousand schools; most of the others serve about a hundred schools. Without explicit methods of dissemination or reproduction, which districts in their present form seldom provide, most innovations and improvements are not likely to spread from one school or district to another. Beyond extending individual programs that work in one school setting to another school setting is the larger challenge of building an infrastructure to support and sustain improvement across a whole community or network of schools simultaneously.

Ensuring Equity

There is one paramount function that *only* a school district (or some redesigned version of a school district) can perform: ensuring equity. If the needs of

[1] This is not only true of public schools. Private and parochial schools don't go it alone either. For support, they look to national and regional associations and networks.

and resources available to *all* schools were the same, it might make sense to free them from formal district ties and allow them to seek those supports on their own from external partners, just as successful charter schools and schools engaged in whole-school reform do.

But school needs and resources differ. Some schools have highly experienced staff, while others have an abundance of new teachers, bringing different strengths and weaknesses to the schools' instructional programs. Some schools have a particularly supportive local community, while others are more isolated. Some schools have solid connections to professional development and technical-assistance providers, while others are unaware of resources that exist or are unable to access them. Just as there are differences between urban and non-urban schools, there are also differences within cities on all of these factors. And the schools serving the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised families tend to end up with the least support.

The answer, then, is not to let schools go it alone but to replace districts or redesign them around their primary purposes: results and equity. We contend that these purposes are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary.

Emphasizing equity – that is, providing varying supports based on the needs of individual schools, teachers, and children – is the only way to ensure *results* for all children in all schools in a system. Likewise, emphasizing results – that is, expecting all children to grow up to be knowledgeable, productive, caring adults – is the only way to ensure *equity* for all children in all schools in a system. Meeting these twin goals requires high expectations for all children and equitable opportunities for all young people to learn and develop.

Community Responsibility

Only an agency or set of agencies external to the school, charged with ensuring that all schools have access to the supports and resources they need, can address these inequities and structural defects. This entity could be a redesigned school district, reformed from within. Or it could be a much more radical alternative, an altogether new agency led by, for example, a community organization or a for-profit company.

Whatever the path, to ensure results and equity this redesigned or new entity would have to take on the characteristics of what we call a local education support system. A local education support system would incorporate some of the functions of traditional school districts, scrap others, and involve a much wider spectrum of community members, organizations, and agencies than is typically the case now.

It is important to emphasize that the school district, as it currently exists, cannot and should not provide all the educational and social supports children and youth need in order to achieve both results and equity. Many different individuals and organizations – including schools, parents and families, civic groups, research groups, community- and faith-based organizations, private-sector companies, and city agencies – must work together to support and sustain the healthy learning and development of children and youth. Accountability among these partners ought to be distributed; that is, each partner is accountable for its part in improving results, in proportion to its responsibility, and the partners share their unique strengths to bring about better results. In other words, districts and their communities need to work together to create a local education support system, a "smart district."

Essential Functions of a Local Education Support System

Working together, the individuals and organizations that form a local education support system need to perform the following three essential functions to promote results and equity for young people.

1. Provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions.

The evidence from individual school reforms suggests the range of supports schools need to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. But districts seldom provide such supports in a systematic way for all schools. The support they do provide is often haphazard and unrelated to schools' improvement needs. And districts intervene in schools only in extreme circumstances, a time when it is most difficult to turn the situation around. Before districts act, students languish.

Appropriate Support

Schools have the right to demand support to assist their efforts to improve performance, and districts and communities should be held accountable for making such support available. This does not mean that the district's central office (or its equivalent) must provide all the support schools need; indeed, most central offices would be ill equipped to do so. Much of the support could come from schools themselves, through a redeployment of teaching staffs; some could come from universities or cultural institutions; and some from community-based organizations or private contractors. The central office's role, where it does not provide services directly, would be that of a broker, making sure the appropriate support goes to the schools that need it.

The local education support system would provide or broker the following services to schools: assistance in curriculum development and mapping against standards; support in selecting curriculum materials that reflect these standards and high expectations; assistance in analyzing student work and the lessons teachers assign; structural and substantive supports to involve all teachers in content-based coaching, collaborative teaching, and other effective forms of professional development; opportunities to receive mentoring for all new teachers; and assistance in scheduling, budgeting, and expanding the school day and year to capitalize on these supports. The exact combination of these supports would, of course, depend on the needs and circumstances of each school; that is, rather than standardize inputs, as the administrative progressives tried to do a century ago, a local education support system, or smart district, would customize the supports and services it provides.

Timely Intervention

Local education support systems also have an obligation to intervene in a timely manner if schools do not make progress. It is important to emphasize the word *timely*: reviews of efforts to intervene once schools have failed show that such rescue attempts are grueling, unpredictable, and expensive. Early intervention and support have been shown to produce huge rewards in the case of students; the same kind of monitoring, diagnosis, and support might make sense when dealing with schools in "turnaround" conditions. Again, these interventions must be calibrated to the unique needs of each school.

WHAT "SMART DISTRICTS" DO

1. Provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions.
2. Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.
3. Make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices.

The remedy should be appropriate to the situation – not based on a one-size-fits-all policy prescription – and should be accompanied by the support necessary to produce results.

2. Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.

Helping all students reach academic performance standards demands some fundamental level of adequate resources, since everything that a school district does for children costs money. The disparities in funding between urban and suburban schools are well known, and urban districts in many states have taken the lead in trying to secure adequate resources, often through legal and constitutional challenges.

Yet resources *within* districts are often highly inequitable as well. Some schools receive richer resources – more funding, better and more experienced teachers, and greater access to resources in the community – than others. The better-resourced schools tend to be those serving students from relatively affluent families.

Equitable Allocation to Schools

One reason for these inequitable patterns is the way districts allocate resources to schools. Most districts typically allocate a certain base number of staff positions to every school – for example, every elementary school might get one principal, librarian, and physical education teacher, regardless of how many students attend the school. Once schools hit a certain threshold size, they might receive additional personnel, such as an assistant principal. The result is that the smaller schools tend to have proportionately more staff.

In addition, districts allocate more staff to support special programs and needs identified by the school or district. In some urban districts, to cite a common case, magnet schools receive additional staff, on top of the standard allocation, to support their specific programs, so these schools possess greater resources than other schools in the same district.

Other resource allocation practices also mask inequities. For example, school budgets are determined using the district's average teacher salary, rather than the actual salaries of the staff in that school. Thus, in the budgeting process, schools with many experienced teachers – and these tend to be schools serving relatively affluent students – appear to have the same level of resources as schools with the same number of teachers but who have less experience. In reality, the total dollar amount allocated in salaries to the school with many experienced teachers is much higher. In addition to the inequity between schools, this practice also masks real differences in instructional skill and experience within schools. When all teachers are considered "the same," the incentive to deploy teachers in different ways to support instructional needs – such as concentrating the use of experienced teachers in critical subject areas – is virtually eliminated.

Human Resources Systems

The situation is exacerbated by districts' human resources systems – or, perhaps more accurately, the lack of human resources systems. To be sure, districts have offices that manage recruitment and hiring, but these practices are seldom managed strategically to match strengths to needs. Districts engage the labor market in a limited way and establish a single set of conditions for employment – teachers get paid the same regardless of where and what they teach, for example. Moreover, there is usually no connection between recruitment and teacher evaluation, compensation, and professional development: compensation and career advancement are automatic, not related to demonstrable skill in improving outcomes for children. It is little wonder that students' learning opportunities are distributed so inequitably.

Community Resources

Another contributing factor to the inequities in opportunities for children and youth is that school districts often work in isolation from their commu-

nities. This not only limits opportunities for parents, students, and community members to influence district policies; it also leaves districts out of the distribution of other community resources that might support education. These resources – parks, youth-serving organizations, after-school homework clubs, internships, and many other non-school activities – are often distributed just as inequitably as district funds and human resources.

To ensure equivalent results for all children, local education support systems need to allocate resources to schools in an equitable manner, provide schools with the flexibility to use the resources the way they see fit, and facilitate school connections to other supportive resources. This means not only changing budgeting and human resource functions, but also working in partnership with community members to help distribute and utilize existing supports more effectively.

Resources beyond the District

While we have focused primarly on within-district resource allocation, we also know that intrastate, interdistrict, and federal resource allocations are key issues. For example, many urban districts are making legal and constitutional challenges to state education-financing systems. While each of these cases must be reviewed on its individual merits, we believe that as a nation, we must re-examine how we distribute educational resources. Undoubtedly, additional resources will be needed if we are to reach our goal of providing all children with their rightful educational opportunities.

That need raises the issue of what investment we as a country are willing to make in children, especially poor children, compared with other developed countries (Perie et al. 2000). If we are truly to make results and equity the norm in our education system, we will not be able to avoid rethinking how resources are distributed *within* and *between* school districts, and it is likely that investment in poor children will have to be leveled up, to make their outcomes equivalent to those of more advantaged students.

3. Make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices.

To achieve results, local education support systems need to know current and past results and what they have to do to improve those results. That means that districts and their partners need to develop and maintain sophisticated data systems that enable them to monitor the performance of young people, schools, and the partners themselves against the results they expect. Few communities have this capability.

Leading Indicators

Although districts collect a wealth of data, the information is often inadequate, and data gathered about youth relies heavily on test scores and school graduation and promotion rates. These indicators, while important, do not tell the whole story. They do not provide information about other aspects of youth development, such as health or well-being, or of a community's supports for children and families; they seldom show student growth over time; and they do not say very much about what schools and their partners need to do to improve results.

In addition, test scores and other indicators typically collected usually arrive too late to help individual children or schools who are struggling. For example, we already know that most urban schools do not meet state or district performance standards. These measures do not tell us whether schools or districts are investing in the types of instructional changes that will lead to higher performance down the road. Student performance measures are, to use a term from economists, *lagging indicators,* like unemployment statistics.

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Economists do not wait for unemployment rates to be released to see if the economy is on the road toward full employment. To determine if employment rates will rise in the future, they examine other indicators – such as factory orders – which are known as *leading indicators.*

School districts and their communities need leading indicators of educational performance and practices that take at least two forms. The first type are the crudest sort of indicators, similar to the "Check Engine Soon" light on a car dashboard, which acts as an early warning system. These "dashboard" indicators don't diagnose a specific problem, but monitored carefully (and ideally longitudinally) they can help districts know where to look for trouble.

Much of this data is already collected by districts but not used proactively. For example, monitoring the rates of teacher transfer or attrition at each school might identify schools most in need of intensive intervention. Local education support systems must pay attention to early warning signs like these so they can target their resources and provide appropriate supports.

A second type of leading indicator, indicators of proven instructional practice, is much more cumbersome to measure but just as essential. If student performance measures are lagging indicators, then logically it is necessary to use indicators other than test scores to measure whether schools are engaged in the kinds of instructional activities likely to lead to student achievement. Local education support systems need to know, for example, if schools are effectively analyzing teachers' lessons and student work, or if they are implementing curricula mapped to district standards. Admittedly, this is a difficult task. At the very least, it is time-consuming and labor intensive to collect such data across large school systems; and in some subject areas and grade levels, what to measure is unclear. For our vision of local education support systems to become a reality, additional work will be needed in this area.

District-level Indicators

Both types of leading indicators – dashboard indicators and measures of proven practice – are needed at the district level as well. To be sure, districts are accountable to the community for student performance and for proper management of taxpayer funds. But just as with schools, these lagging measures of performance do not say whether districts are putting in place the infrastructure that will ensure positive results for students in the coming months and years. They do not say whether districts have the capacity to support schools' instructional improvement efforts, or whether they are providing the curriculum and professional development support schools need.

Without information on district structure and policies and on school practices – that is, leading indicators of performance – students are often left behind. These measures are especially important in urban districts, where most schools perform below state and district performance standards. These communities and these schools cannot wait the estimated three to seven years it takes to find out if the changes they are making are yielding gains in student performance. This information is particularly vital now, since the new federal No Child Left Behind Act holds schools and districts strictly accountable for improving achievement.

Local education support systems integrate not only the collection of data, but also the serious and regular examination of data, into the normal operating procedures for schools and districts. Thorough needs assessments based on sound data, rather than on subjective factors like personalities or politics, can provide solid directions for how to improve services.

Community Accountability

Appraising results regularly and leveraging data that already exist can also help the partners involved in local education support systems hold each other accountable for improved service delivery. Local edu-

cation support systems share information widely and work with community partners to help ensure distributed responsibility and accountability for results. Reliable, shared data can be used for planning and evaluation and for understanding trends and mapping service availability.

Data can be powerful. Analyzing and publicizing data on educational performance in conjunction with information on young people's health and well-being, as well as data on the use of civic resources such as libraries, parks, and other public services, can catalyze wide civic involvement in, and advocacy for, child and family issues.

A Call to Action

Each of the three functions of a local education support system sketched herein – providing schools with needed support and timely interventions; ensuring that schools have equitable resources and power to make good decisions; and providing appropriate indicators for school and district accountability and decision making – is necessary, but none is sufficient on its own to ensure results and equity. And communities face major hurdles to put them in place.

To transform themselves into "smart districts," districts and their partners need brainpower to design these steps carefully, political will to overcome the inevitable resistance to change, and skills and constructive relationships to implement them effectively. Clearly, making results and equity the overriding purposes for school districts has major implications for urban (indeed, all) district design and for the very definition of what a district is.

Unlike most school districts today, the local education support systems we envision – and desperately need – provide high-quality, equitable educational opportunities to all children in all schools. They help children, educators, and schools achieve results by holding them to the same high expectations but also by offering different support strategies based on the unique needs of the children, educators, and schools. The system itself encompasses a broad range of partners who take joint responsibility for results. Furthermore, the structural and managerial arrangements by which these local education support systems function every day are driven by what it takes to achieve those results – not by history, convention, or convenience.

The urban school district, as it exists today, is not only ineffective for far too many students, but is for the most part invisible to the general public. When the average citizen thinks of public education, the images that come to mind first are probably not the superintendent, the board of education, and the central office. More likely, people think of their child's school, a favorite teacher, or any of their own myriad learning experiences.

But what is a school district if not the way in which a community organizes itself to provide public education? The district may not evoke dramatic or inspiring images, but it is critical to American democracy. Education is not only an individual good; it is also a community good and a societal good. Our country faces major changes in population and in the economy over the next century. Large-scale improvements in public education in the United States are necessary if we wish to avoid further perpetuating a nation of haves and have-nots, based largely on race, class, and geography.

Ample evidence has shown that we *can* improve our system of urban public education. Our dedication to children, our commitment to democracy, and our sense of justice compel us to act on that knowledge *now*. The continuing mission of SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK is to contribute powerful ideas and concrete supports in its work with urban leaders who share this sense of urgency.

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